Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History: Strategies for Reconstruction, Deconstruction and Politization of History

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Abstract

Today, historical video games going beyond the boundaries of the purely entertainment framework of screen media are increasingly influencing the formation of the public history infosphere. The aim of the study is a comprehensive analysis of historical video games as a tool for constructing mass historical consciousness and the implementation of ideologized strategies for the politics of memory. Methodologically, the work is based on the concepts of "public history infosphere" and "politics of memory", as well as the historical method and classification approach. In addition, elements of comparative analysis, the method of narrative research of cultural artifacts and the optics of I. Bogost's procedural rhetoric are used.

The study determines the specificity and nature of broadcasting historical plots in the context of procedural actualization of video game narratives. Starting from the interactive-procedural nature of video games, the original possibilities and objective constraints in the reproduction of "stories about the past" are revealed. It is demonstrated that the programmatic and subjective-user modalities of a video game existence endow it with rhizome and nomadic characteristics. Video game architectonics has an intention to deconstruct the "metaphysics of presence" and the main repressive instances characteristic of traditional historical narrative. At the same time, based on the concept of simulations by G. Frasca, three main formats of historical video game reconstructions are revealed: factual (plot and setting), logical-dynamic and hybrid. The article identifies the most common ways of distorting, mythologizing and politicizing history in video games. Special attention is paid to the explication of the ideologized concept of "anti-Sovietism" in video game plots, as a form of quasi-historical criticism of the Soviet regime and the continuation of the rhetoric of the "Cold War".

The results of the study can be used in the expert assessment of the space of public history, in the identification of relevant media tools and meaningful concepts that form its semantic framework. In addition, certain conclusions are essential for the effective correction of memory policy strategies implemented in screen digital media.

Keywords

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Исторические видеоигры в контексте Public History: стратегии реконструкции, деконструкции и политизации истории

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Аннотация

Сегодня исторические видеоигры, выйдя за границы исключительно развлекательной рамки экранных медиа, все заметнее оказывают влияние на формирование инфосферы public history. Целью исследования является комплексная аналитика исторических видеоигр как инструмента конструирования массового исторического сознания и имплементации идеологизированных стратегий политики памяти. Методологически работа опирается на концепты "public history infosphere" и «политика памяти», а также исторический метод и классификационный подход. Кроме того, используются элементы компаративного анализа, метода нарративных исследований культурных артефактов и оптика процедурной риторики Я. Богоста.

В исследовании определяется специфика и характер трансляции исторических сюжетов в контексте процедурной актуализации видеоигровых нарративов. Отталкиваясь от интерактивно-процедурной природы видеоигр, раскрываются оригинальные возможности и объективные ограничители в воспроизведении «рассказов о прошлом». Выявлено, что программная и субъектно-пользовательская модальности существования видеоигры наделяют ее ризомными и номадическими характеристиками. Видеоигровая архитектоника обладает интенцией к деконструкции «метафизики присутствия» и основных репрессивных инстанций, характерных для традиционного исторического нарратива. В то же время, основываясь на концепции симуляций Г. Фраски, раскрываются три основных формата исторических видеоигровых реконструкций: фактологический (сюжетный и сеттинговый), логико-динамический и гибридный. В статье определены наиболее распространенные способы искажения, мифологизации и политизации истории в видеоиграх. Отдельное внимание уделяется экспликации в видеоигровых сюжетах идеологизированного концепта «антисоветизм», как формы квазиисторической критики советского режима и продолжения риторики «холодной войны».

Результаты исследования могут быть использованы при экспертной оценке пространства публичной истории, выявлении актуальных медиаинструментов и содержательных концептов, формирующих его смысловую рамку. Кроме того, отдельные выводы существенны для эффективной коррекции стратегий политики памяти, реализуемых в экранно-цифровых медиа.

Ключевые слова

исторические видеоигры; политизация истории; экранные медиа; массовое историческое сознание; исторические реконструкции; политика памяти; мифологизация истории; public history; антисоветизм; деконструкция истории

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Introduction

Against the background of the aggravated geopolitical situation expressed in the emergence of new international challenges and risks, as well as the actualization of regional confrontations and the trend towards hybridization of conflicts, references to history are intensified as an element of legitimization of various political activities. Accordingly, the leading states are purposefully building strategies of the policy of memory to form a quite definite (often tendentious and even ideologized) image of the event series of the past, its logic and main determinants.

Today, the collective historical consciousness is formed by a multitude of information sources, broadcast, first of all in the context of various media of mass culture. Historical knowledge in its socially significant dimension is increasingly consolidated, and it begins to dominate the cultural space in the modality of public history. In it, the actual historical information is recoded into cultural texts (various symbols, manifestations, works of art, etc. to which we refer here), which are comparatively simple for primary assimilation by the broad masses (Fogu, 2009, pp. 110-114).

From the second half of the 20th century various screen media began to play a significant role in formation of the public history infosphere (Aurell, 2015, pp. 149-150; Montero Diaz, 2013, pp. 162-165). The film industry has especially succeeded here, which quickly mastered and filmed a number of historical plots. Feature films based on various historical episodes are becoming an important factor in the construction of historical public consciousness.

At the same time, since the beginning of the 21st century, video games have begun to occupy an increasingly important place among the variety of screen media. They overcame their initially exclusively entertaining "ghetto" and relatively quickly institutionalized as a kind of digital art, a sport and a special communication environment. They also became the nucleus of many subcultural formations and contributed to the popularization of gamification practices. In the context of the increasing importance of game narratives and complication of gameplay mechanics, video games have become quite common to refer to various historical themes. As a result, today it is the video game format that many socially important historical plots are represented in, influencing the content and semantic accentuation in the public history infosphere (Chapman, 2020, pp. 135-136).

Despite the comparative novelty of this cultural practice in the integration of historical narratives into video games, a research discourse on this issue has already been formed. In the foreign segment of game studies there is a separate direction called historical studies, which examines the specifics of the presence and interactive disclosure of historical plots in a video game format. In particular, these topics are developed in the works of L. Traynor (2020), E. Wright (2018), K. Lewis (2020) and D. Spring (2015). Within the framework of the domestic discourse of game studies, these are the PhD dissertation by K.V. Yablokov (2005) supported

in the already relatively distant 2005, as well as a number of topical articles by S. I. Belov (2018; 2020; 2021), M. A. Bochanov (2018), V. V. Kirichenko (2019), L. V. Moyzhes (2020), S. O. Osekin (2016) and S. Yu. Cherny (2017).

At the same time, most of the works on this topic are thematically private in nature or differ in descriptive presentation. This actualizes additionally the research focus we have chosen and the methodological format of the analysis of historical video games as a special screen dimension of public history, where the practices of reconstruction, deconstruction and politicization of history are implemented.

Methodologically, the paper is based on the concepts of "public history infosphere" and "politics of memory". They form the general focus of the study of history in a wide socio-cultural space, including various media. Historical method is the central, setting the appropriate research perspective for the exposure of the topic, as well as the classification approach which makes it possible to structure and group historical video games. In addition, elements of comparative analysis, the method of narrative research of cultural artifacts, and the optics of procedural rhetoric of I. Bogost are used.

Architectonics of Historical Video Games

The first video games the plot and setting of which correlated with various historical themes, appeared in the late 60s or early 70s., 20th century. However, due to the underdevelopment of the narrative structure of the games of that time, addressing history in them was formal and extremely simplified. This situation began to change in the late 90s, when, firstly, the developers began to master new narrative techniques combining them with the procedural mechanics of the game, and secondly, the graphic component of video games improved significantly, which allowed applying more realistic visual solutions. All this contributed to the emergence of many historical games from the beginning of the 21st century.

It should be noted right away that the very concept of "historical video games" is very amorphous in content and has different definitions. In this study, we mean by the term the entire set of video games which reflect any historical elements that are part of the plot, gameplay or graphic design.

At the same time it should be emphasized that the adaptation of historical narration to a video game format has a number of peculiar features due to the software architectonics of video games. It is pertinent here to recall numerous discussions regarding strategies for defining video games that I. Bogost summarized in his work "Video-games are a Mess". Without going into the debate about the ontology of video games, we note that a video game exists in at least two modalities that are essential for our consideration. First, it is in the form of a program code containing, potentially, the entire set of procedural and narrative structures of the game. Secondly, it is in the form of an actual gaming session implemented by a specific user.

However, there is a noticeable distance in content between these modalities. The first, in fact, is a set of rules and syncretic informational array of the game, where game elements and possible paths are combined into a single matrix. In this case, the rules can be either categorical or optional imperative. The second modality is the subjective (user) interpretation (through gameplay) of the given rules and texts. Here the player, by his actions, mediated by game interfaces and program code, influences the disclosure, course and dynamics of the story. Accordingly, the historical plot, translated into the video-game architectonics, must also be realized in these two modalities, which creates a new optics of looking at history.

A particularly obvious meaningful imbalance between these ranges arises in the case of nonlinear video games that allow for the implementation of several plot options or are based on the "open plot" model. In this case, the historical text at the programmatic, implicit level is represented by a multivariate matrix of possibilities and limitations. It is meaningfully voluminous and has a fundamentally nomadic, rhizome structure. It contains a lot of local plot branches, which not only do not cohide with each other, but mutually exclude each other. The grammar of this text is such that it cannot be read in a binary system of coordinates ("truth and falsehood", "real and unreal"), inherent in the traditional perception of facts and events. These contradictions are removed only by the virtual status of its existence. Accordingly, at this level, the historical text undergoes a radical reformatting, acquiring a nomadic structure. At the same time, user access to it is limited to a narrow circle of conditional programmers.

The general user reads the historical text of a video game exclusively in the second, subjectively oriented modality. By her actions, she actualizes one of the many program-potential options for the development of the plot, perceiving the historical narrative precisely in this focus of personal game preferences. In this case, the game plot can completely lose its connection with factology of the historical narrative. Some games use special software tools trying to save it. For example, in "Europa Universalis IV" (2013), a system of dynamic events is realized, when certain historically reliable events are integrated into the plot. They are designed to preserve the illusion of a recognizable historicity of the development of the plot, but they do not have a significant narrative influence, fulfilling more a decorative function. As a result, the historical narrative is largely individualized, being coherent, first of all, with the goals and playing skills of a particular user.

It is known that the view of the historical narrative is traditionally carried out from the position of "metaphysics of presence" (according to M. Heidegger), in which the present prevails over the past. This optics forms the stereotype of the linearity and inconstancy of history. However, it is becoming apparent that the architectonics of video games is destroying this stereotype. In addition to the two nomadic modalities for the implementation of historical text in video games, the "reload" function additionally deconstructs the "metaphysics of presence". It creates an opportunity for multiple actualizations of various variations of the game narrative, absorbing its traditional constancy.

This all applies, first of all, to historical video games, which initially allow for nonlinearity of the plot and openness of the game world for the actualization of various scenarios. We can give examples of plot-linear video games, where the choice of a gamer affects exclusively the tactics of overcoming game obstacles without meaningfully changing the general narrative. However, even in this case, the user may lose, i.e. not be able to solve the programmed tasks that make up the core of the procedural part of the game, which will lead to an objective interruption of the narrative. Thus, performing the mission called "Battle of Kursk" for the side USSR in an actually reliable and plot-based linear strategic game, the gamer may not be able to cope with it. This is quite natural for a game narrative, but fundamentally foreign to a strictly historical one. At the level of game narration, this will lead to a losing situation in this battle which will narratively lead to a distortion of the story. Let us emphasize that this possibility is imminent in the game architecture itself. As a result, such video games create an opportunity for fragmentation and collage transformation of historical memory.

All of the above mentioned allows us to apply the deconstruction optics of J. Derrida to historical video games. Conceptually, a referent historical narrative has at least two repressive instances – ontological-objective, the situation of fact-givenness, availability, and subjective-evaluative, expressed in the person of the conditional architect of historical memory. They are both deconstructed in video games. Fact-given is absorbed by the locally actual subjectivity of the historical text of video games and the "reload" function. Factuality in a video game loses its general, universal ontology, depending on the user and restarting game sessions. The historical architect is partially blurred by the programmatic nomadism of the historical text. However, its repressive function does not disappear completely, but receives a new toolkit for implementing supervision and correcting user actions (this topic will be discussed in more detail in the part devoted to the politicization of video games).

As a result, video games organically fit into some principles of postmodern culture, serving as an original space for the deconstruction of historical narrative. Here the principle of invariance of history is destroyed, and its content turns into a nomadic text. The modern researcher F. Furtai notes that in such video games there is a deformation of the "common human memory", which "in the process of creating a game reality loses its logic, integrity, factual immutability, irreversibility, what allows to characterize it as a perfect reality. It decomposes into elements that are mixed in the virtuality plot arbitrarily, obeying only the will of the authors" (2009, p. 116). Given the above-mentioned significant politically motivational role of history, this situation opens up new opportunities for reformatting "stories about the past" (Uricchio, 2005, pp. 330-332). In fact, the public history discourse created by video games teaches the user to the inconstancy of history, its factual mobility, greatly facilitating and even latently legitimizing the practice of "rewriting" history.

Reconstruction Potential Historical Video Games

Our theory of the reconstruction potential of video games is based on G. Frasca's concept of simulations. He proposes to consider video games first of all in the optics of simulations, as one of their varieties. It is especially important how Frasca defines the very practice of simulation: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (2003, p. 223). It is obvious that the absolute identity of the systems is fundamentally impossible. Only the key characteristics (properties, signs) of the primary system reproduced in its model, matter.

Accordingly, a historical video game explicated in the optics of simulation always reconstructs only individual elements of the historical continuum. It recreates a significant (for the authors of the game) set of characteristics of a certain historical episode. They can be determined, for example, by the genre of the game or its regional positioning, and by the ideological predilections of the authors. At the same time it is important, for the analytics of historical reconstructions of video games, not only what set of features is simulated, but also what the authors have excluded from the simulation. The very implicit marking of some elements of the historical plot / event as insignificant can act as an ideological message and form a certain focus of the interpretation of history.

All video game historical reconstructions can be divided into three main types according to the nature of the operation of historical material and its explication: *factual reconstructions, logical-dynamic reconstructions and hybrid reconstructions*[1].

Factual reconstructions, at first glance, is the most obvious tool and a factor of direct influence on the public history infosphere. Concrete historical facts, events and images are quite authentically recreated in them. Their implementation has two typological varieties – plot-linear and setting-based.

In the first case a video game broadcasts a general event-driven fabula of a specific historical episode. This excludes the possibility of a gamer's influence on the global plot which simulates the main dynamics of real historical events. This restructuring model fits well with such linear game series as Blitzkrieg (2003-2017), Men of War (2004-2016), Sniper Elite (2005-2021) and Sudden Strike (2000-2017). Also, this type of a game often allows for a private fictional story, which, for example, focuses on the game protagonist. His personal story is integrated into the global historical plot without affecting its authenticity. A similar technique is implemented in the series "Brothers in Arms" (2005-2015), "Medal of Honour" (1999-2020) and many other projects. A particularly interesting embodiment in terms of narrative design and semantic content of this technique is found in "Valiant Hearts: The Great War" (2014).

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1   This typology is certainly not devoid of shortcomings and is somewhat conventional, but, in our opinion, it may well be used as a working classification for the varieties of historical reconstructions. We believe that the introduction of this distinction is important for a productive, differentiated study of historical video games.

According to its game mechanics, "Valiant Hearts: The Great War" is not a very original platformer with elements of puzzles, which, at first glance, does not create expectations of historical depth and elaboration. However, in reality, "Valiant Hearts: The Great War" turns out to be a very distinctive project that has managed to show the tragedy and anti-humanistic essence of war. The narrative of the game is served through tracing the fate of three heroes who, by the will of external circumstances, were drawn into the events of the First World War. The gamer becomes a participant in a very personal story, which is broken and dramatized by the war. "Valiant Hearts: The Great War" contains a powerful anti-militaristic semantic message combining elements of the existential tragedy of the novels by E.M. Remarque and E. Hemingway with subtle humour of the works of J. Hasek. At the same time it reconstructs quite reliably the general factology and global dynamics of the events of the First World War.

Setting-oriented factual reconstructions have a slightly different specificity. In them, historical simulations are realized through the recreation of the general environment of the game action. Here, attention is paid to relative authenticity of the visual and aesthetic component of the game world and the design of activities in it. Historicity can also be enhanced by the presence of certain historic figures typical of the epoch. At the same time, the actual plot component of these games can admit noticeable deviations from historical accuracy or even completely break with it.

Such projects include the strategic series "Age of Empires". On the one hand, in the "Age of Empires" there are several game civilizations that have their own design of units and architectural structures, as well as formally unique trajectories of cultural and technological development. On the other hand, these differences are largely decorative in nature, carrying no deep semantic content. The factors of the development of civilization are schematic and in many respects conventional; they absolutely do not reflect the historical reality. Obviously, "Age of Empires" is more focused on screen-interactive entertainment, which is externally (designer-) framed by historical elements. The setting of the project is historically quite recognizable and relatively reliable, but only where its reconstructive potential is exhausted. Nevertheless, the game can act as a factual framework of ideas about a number of the most important events in world history, thereby influencing the public history infosphere (Wainwright, 2014, pp. 598-602).

Another example of setting-oriented historical video games is economic strategies implemented in historical scenery. First of all, it is necessary to note the famous game series "Caesar", as well as a number of projects created according to its templates: "Pharaoh" (1999) "Cleopatra: Queen of the Nile" (2000), "Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom" (2002), "Zeus: Master of Olympus" (2000), "Poseidon: Master of Atlantis" (2001), "Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile" (2004) and "CivCity: Rome" (2006). Basically, they are focused on simulating the construction and functioning of a complex socio-economic ecological environment of a city/

state. Their reconstructive-historical part is limited to external design and setting bearing, in many respects, a formal character.

In general there are a lot of historical-setting games. For example, the entourage of Medieval Europe is very popular, which is used in the series "Crusader Kings" (2004-2020) and "Stronghold" (2001-2021), as well as in "Chivalry: Medieval Warfare" (2012). Also, in strategy and action games, the setting of the Second World War is often reproduced. The aesthetics of Ancient Rome are embodied in "Ryse: Son of Rome" (2014); the scenery of feudal Japan is very impressively reconstructed in "Way of the Samurai" (2002-2015) and especially in "Ghost of Tsushima" (2020). Obviously, in this format, it is relatively easy to implement external historicity, thereby creating visual recognition and attractiveness of the project, but, at the same time, not being limited by the framework of plot authenticity.

It is important to note that in reality the plot-linear and setting accentuation of the historical-reenactment content of video games can intersect, blurring the distinction within the framework of the factological type of simulations. Therefore, this selection is not applicable to some fact-oriented games.

Logic-dynamic reconstructions are another large class of video game historical reconstructions. In terms of the grammatical design of narrative and simulative accentuations, they are fundamentally different from factual simulations. Factual reliability is of secondary importance here, usually expressed in a point-like reproduction of individual historical facts. At the same time it is usually absorbed by the nomadic dynamics of the game process, which is not limited by the framework of historical reliability. They change the optics regarding the reconstruction of history, where the simulation of logic of a historical process, its multifactorial nature, permanent dynamics and optionality is the primary.

The most typical examples of such projects are the global strategic game series "Civilization" (1991-2016), "Europa Universalis" (2000-2013) and "Hearts of Iron" (2002-2016).

The core of the game concept "Civilization" is the presentation of world history through the evolution of individual civilizations. The gamer controlling a separate civilization leads it through the main stages of historical development – from the Ancient World to the present (with elements of futurology). The game has many development parameters – economy, politics, technology, military force, etc., which simulate the main areas of development of real countries. The general trajectory of its historical development depends on the initial choice of civilization by the gamer. Thus the priorities of its socio-political, economic, scientific and military organization are predetermined.

At the same time, there is not much of narrative history proper in "Civilization"; its external historicity is expressed more in individual facts (often in isolation from the real historical context) and general design decisions on visualizing the architecture of cult buildings (Chen, 2004, pp. 101-103). But I think that the main historical-reconstructive merit of "Civilization" is the simulation of the dynamics of

historical development, taking into account its multifactorial nature. In other words, this video game is more aimed not at broadcasting a historical narrative, but at a procedurally-interactive demonstration of the principles of historical evolution.

Of course the dynamic model of history in "Civilization" contains many conventions due to its simulation nature. However, it manages to present a fundamentally new look at the historical and re-enactment potential of video games, which distinguishes them from other on-screen media. This type of reconstruction departs from the descriptive simulation of history, trying to recreate the logic of the historical process through procedural practices.

"Europa Universalis" and "Hearts of Iron" series are based on similar game principles, but these have a clearly limited historical framework in which the gamer will have to implement various strategies for world domination. Here, at the start of the gameplay, a historically authentic political disposition is modelled as a whole. The political geography of the historical period and a certain set of indicators of the development of a particular country (adjusted for their simulation nature) are conveyed realistically. This is the basic factual realism of "Europa Universalis" and "Hearts of Iron". After the start of the game session, the dynamics of the optional-interactive historical development is launched, which is modelled bearing in mind the initial factors of the development of states, program goals and subjective activities of the player. Taking into account the initially set time frame, in these series, multifactoriality and nonlinear determinism of historical development have been worked out in more detail. All this allows the player to more deeply and rather reliably investigate procedurally the cause-and-effect foundations and logic of the historical process (Cherny, 2017, p. 79).

It can be stated that within the framework of logical-dynamic re-constructions, video games do not act as a tool for the mechanical reflection of the past and do not strive to reproduce an authentic historical narrative. They offer to become a participant in the original media discourse of procedural comparative analytics of history. Logical-dynamic reconstructions contain the intention to study the historical conditions, determinants and paths of development. At the same time, they do not completely lose touch with the conditionally objective historical reality.

Finally, from the point of view of historical accuracy, hybrid *reconstructions* represent a plot and / or procedural eclectic text, in which the syncretism of the real and the fictional is realized. At the same time, within the framework of the game narrative itself, there is no marking of their distinction and priority. They are broadcast as equivalent elements of simulation, leading to an aberration of the historical narrative.

This type of reconstruction includes, for example, the popular video game series "Assassin's Creed" (2007-2020), which features a wide range of historical themes, plots, and personalities. The user will be able to become through a virtual avatar a member of the Third Crusade, political conspiracies of Renaissance Italy at the end of the 15th century, the War of Independence in the United States and

the Great French Revolution, as well as visit Ancient Greece during the Pelo-ponnesian War, Hellenistic Egypt and lead the Viking invasion into England.

At first glance, "Assassin's Creed" strikes with visual authenticity and attention to private historical details. The game also attracts with the concentration of famous historical personalities – military commanders, politicians, philosophers, scientists, and artists. Moreover, the gamer has the opportunity to enter into direct interaction with them, becoming an actor and participant in important historical events. However, a fictional plot-motivational political basis is integrated into the "Assassin's Creed" narrative – the global opposition of the religiously paramili-tary organizations of the Assassins and Templars. It acts as a conceptual factor in the teleology of the historical process within the "Assassin's Creed" metaplot. Accordingly, the key facts and events of history, as well as the actions of famous historical figures in this virtual universe, are explained through the influence of this fictional conflict. Mythological motivation is superimposed on real events through which they are explained.

In addition we can mention the well-known multiplayer projects "World of Tanks" and "World of Warships". They thoroughly reconstruct the appearance and tactical-technical characteristics of armoured vehicles and warships of different countries, designed in the 20-50s of the XX century. At the same time the emphasis is laid on the equipment that took a noticeable part in the Second World War. And this sonority of connection with the historical framework of the World War permeates latently both games creating a very definite optics of looking at game events. However, the organization of game sessions allows the teams possessing equipment from combating countries during the war years to participate in virtual battles. This leads to quite eclectic (from a historical point of view) battles, where the same team may include the Soviet "T-34", the German "Tiger I", the American "Sherman", the French "Lorraine" and the Italian "Pogetto"... Accordingly, an asym-metric historical-reenactment situation of mixing the authentic and the fictional is created, where authentic facts (in the form of military equipment) are randomly organized in the game process.

Ideologization and Politization of Historical Video Games

It is quite indicative that even in Russia where the relationship to video games traditionally has a touch of entertainment marginality, in 2018 at the official state level (in the person of the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administra-tion of the Russian Federation S.V. Kirienko, who oversees the direction of domestic policy) it was stated that video games are today "a space for political strife" (News, 11.09.2018). According to a senior official, video games are often used as a tool for ideological influence and manipulation of public opinion. It is through video games that the space of political mythology and tendentious manifestations is created.

In addition to the already discussed general "window of political opportunities" in terms of the impact on historical memory and public consciousness that video games open, they become a screen-digital media space for broadcasting relevant political concepts (Belyantsev, 2010). Their presence in the grammatical structure of video games is realized in several modalities: firstly, in the direct text of the plot narration, secondly, in the form of a silence figure, and finally, thirdly, in the programmatic architectonics of game rules.

The first modality is the most obvious, easily readable and, as a consequence, exploratively identifiable. In this case, this or that political concept is incorporated directly into the plot narrative and is broadcast through its play-based disclosure. You can cite a number of historical video games, the narrative of which is based on quite distinct ideologemes. Moreover, one can partly agree with S.I. Belov who claims that "the practice of creating games often implies large-scale distortions of history or its politicization" (2018, p. 97).

One of the most striking examples of such projects which caused the greatest public outcry in our country, precisely for ideological reasons, was the strategic video game "Company of Heroes 2" (2013). There were even attempts to prohibit the distribution of this video game on the territory of the Russian Federation as a source of falsification of Russian history. Its plot is dedicated to the events of the Great Patriotic War (WWII), which are presented in a very tendentious ideological key (Griban, 2017). In it, the narration is conducted on behalf of a certain dissident and a prisoner of the GULAG L.A. Isakovich. Previously, being in the ranks of the Red Army, he participated in individual battles of the Second World War, the memories of which make up the mission structure of the game narrative.

These memories which make up the plot of "Company of Heroes 2" are meaningfully composed of a multitude of "facts" that are designed to demonstrate the anti-humanist and totalitarian-repressive essence of the Soviet political regime. For example, barrage detachments unreasonably kill their own soldiers, unarmed soldiers are forced to storm machine-gun bunkers, and officers shoot their soldiers for any disagreement, even with an obviously absurd order. It is noteworthy that criticism of the Soviet regime also extends to certain game mechanics. So, according to the scenario, the player is obliged to burn the houses of civilians filled with people when retreating, and to clear minefields by deliberately detonating the soldiers of the Red Army on them.

At the same time, the plot of the game demonstrates individual examples of personal valour of the soldiers of the Red Army, but they are often shown in a conflict situation with the official army leadership. The feat is shown as a spontaneous grassroots initiative, sometimes contrary to the plans of the authorities.

All this clearly shows the gamer that even the victory in the Second World War itself took place rather contrary to the Soviet leadership and the accepted practices of political governance. A quite obvious conclusion is drawn from the plot campaign: Soviet power is absolutely immoral, antihuman, irrationally destructive and

managerially untenable. Accordingly, in "Company of Heroes 2" the ideological concept of anti-Sovietism is narratively expounded.

Finally, in alternative historical variations of video game plots, the theme of the beginning of the Third World War initiated by the USSR, is often encountered. In particular, this is the plot of the game "World in Conflict: Soviet Assault" (2009) and the popular strategy series "Command & Conquer: Red Alert" (1995-2020). The plot of the latter exploits the theme of the identity of guilt in the outbreak of World War II between Hitler's Germany and the Stalinist USSR. The alternative history line "Command & Conquer: Red Alert" demonstrates that the preventive elimination of A. Hitler does not disallow the outbreak of the Second World War, because I. Stalin becomes its initiator. And even though this series of games is made in a frankly parodic and farcical vein, without pretending to even "alternative" reliability, it becomes a conductor of a completely obvious anti-Soviet ideologeme.

It seems that largely due to such game projects a partially justified position has formed in Russian public opinion that historical video games are often filled with clearly russophobic ideas. In particular, this idea was voiced in 2019 by the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation D.A. Medvedev. He noted that video games often distort and politicize historical facts, presenting them in an anti-Russian tune (News, 29.03.2019). At the same time, the idea of these obvious historical distortions being largely related to the historical inertia of perceiving and reproducing persistent mental stereotypes of the Cold War seems quite reasonable to us (Belov, 2018, p. 99).

The next form of grammatical design for the translation of political meanings in historical video games is *the figure of plot silence*. It is based on the method of factual selection of information arrays, during which individual historical plots fall out of the general narrative. This is a more subtle, implicit way of political influence, aimed at forming a censored idea of a particular historical event.

Here, as an example, we can cite the popular multi-user action game "Battlefield 1" (2016), the plot of which is sacred to the events of the First World War. The game narrative consists of 6 main plots. The gamer alternately fights in different theatres of war – in the forests of France, in the skies of Britain, in the Italian Alps, in the waters of the Gallipoli Peninsula and even in the Arabian Desert. However, in this series, military campaigns on the Eastern Front in which the Russian Empire took part, are completely absent. Accordingly, within the framework of the historical narrative proposed by the game, Russia, through silence, was actually excluded from the ranks of the participants in the First World War.

Similar techniques are used in World War II video games. Red Army campaign and, in general, any mention of actions in the Eastern Front is excluded from the plots of "Medal of Honor", "Brothers in Arms", "Battlefield V" (2018) and a number of other games. (Fedorchenko, 2020, 429 -432). Naturally, all these techniques form a truncated and, as a consequence, distorted perception of the events of the World Wars. Russia as a participant in these wars is simply "erased" from

virtual history and, more importantly, from the formed matrix of the historical consciousness of gamers through the figure of silence.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the theme of the Second World War is not only a historical plot today, but also in many respects a geopolitical one. Thus, the current institutional disposition of states in the international arena (including the composition and powers of the permanent members of the UN Security Council) was formulated by the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition (USSR, USA and Great Britain), taking into account their role in World War II. Therefore, disavowing the role of the USSR in World War II is the practice of mythologizing history, potentially having quite definite geo-political goals. In addition, in our country, the Second World War and its results are a significant "national bond" and a valuable factor in domestic politics. All of this points to an important political dimension of the narrative figures of silence in historical video games.

Finally, the third and, in our opinion, instrumentally most interesting and original form of ideologizing historical games is a set of internal program rules for organizing gameplay and achieving in-game goals. Such techniques are typical for globally strategic video games, typical examples of which are the popular series "Civilization" and "Europa Universalis".

In Civilization, the overall game goal is the maximum development of the initially chosen virtual civilization. At the same time, the programmatically prescribed (i.e. virtually independent of the player's will) conditions for achieving the designated goal are concretized in two main dominant-expansionist strategies of behaviour in the international arena – military-political and cultural-economic. They are, in fact, an expression of two well-known models of power coercion – *hard power* and *soft power*. In fact, in "Civilization" the gamer is faced with the objective need to implement aggressive models of civilizational development, aimed at explicit or veiled oppression of other states. Accordingly, this game concept legitimizes forceful methods and expansionist strategies in the international arena.

In addition, Europa Universalis, in which the player also rules the state over a wide historical period, has very characteristic development options. The game provides a programmatically strategy for the westernization of the country, the implementation of which is presented as an undoubtedly positive, civilization-ally progressive phenomenon. Although the player is free not to implement it, this will automatically lead to a lag in the development of his virtual state and make the victory more problematic (Cherny, 2017, pp. 88-89). As a result, in-game rules push a person to prefer the Western (Euro-Atlantic) model of state and civilizational development.

It is especially important that the procedural rhetoric of video games presupposes the process of implantation of translated images including "using methods of operant conditioning that are highly effective" (Belov, 2018, p. 101). It is quite symptomatic that, apparently, realizing the political significance of historical video games back in 2012, D.A. Medvedev, speaking at a meeting of the Presidiums of the Council

for Culture and the Council for Science and Technology under President of the Russian Federation, proposed to create a Russian analogue of the popular multi-player online game "World of Warcraft" (News, 2011), which would become a media tool state policy of memory.

Conclusions

The study showed that video games occupy a prominent place in contemporary space of screen culture, being an original virtual-interactive medium. Their methods of information delivery are based on a unique procedural and rhetorical toolkit. It creates a wide range of opportunities in the field of formation of mass historical consciousness and the public history infosphere. "The system of interpretation of historical events fixed in the game is integrated into the cultural memory of the player" (Belov, 2020, p. 60).

It can be stated that historical video games have objective limitations in reconstruction of history at the level of their software architectonics. The programmatic and subjective-user modalities of the existence of a video game endow it with rhizome and nomadic characteristics. In addition, video-game architectonics has an intention to deconstruct the "metaphysics of presence" and the main repressive instances characteristic of traditional historical narrative.

At the same time video games have significant reconstructive potential. It is implemented in three main formats of simulations: factual (plot and setting), logical-dynamic and hybrid. A wide range of historical themes and plots are revealed, presented within the framework of video game narratives. Almost every significant cultural and historical era is reflected in the video game format with an emphasis on military battle episodes, contributing to the formation of public history.

Finally, the main strategies for politicizing and ideologizing historical video games as an instrument of memory politics were identified. In particular, using specific examples, the presence of the ideologized concept of "anti-Sovietism" is revealed in video game plots, within the framework of which ideologically biased and frankly mythologized historical narratives are created. In them, the USSR is portrayed as an aggressive militaristic and totalitarian state, the supreme power of which is pursuing an extremely inhuman policy that poses a threat to both its own citizens and all "civilized countries". This quasi-historical critique of the Soviet regime is often automatically applied to the image of modern-day Russia, with the whole set of menacing clichés and stereotypes almost entirely preserved.

It seems that in this video games reproduce the standard set of ideologemes that have been formed in the countries of the Euro-Atlantic community during the 20th century in a situation of acute ideological confrontation with the USSR. Taking into account the tone of presentation of information in many modern Western media, this rhetoric of the Cold War is still popular and remains in demand in the countries mentioned. It is designed to consolidate, already in new genera-

tions, a hostile or, at least, a wary attitude towards Russia, as well as to disavow its progressive and decisive role in the fight against the Third Reich and the threat of the spread of fascism.

At the same time, most of the video games reviewed were developed by private companies and formally are, above all, commercial projects. Therefore, development studios initially focus on marketing attractive and massively demanded semantic concepts that will help increase the sales of their video games. And in this sense, they do not (apparently?) have an initial goal of politicizing games; they just often use ideologemes and political myths that have already been formed and are firmly entrenched in the mass consciousness. That is, in them the plot reproduces and sells what is understandable to a mass user and is popular in the Western world. It seems that in this aspect, video games are more likely to adapt to the information mainstream that has already been formed over the past decades, reproducing themes and agendas characteristic of it.

In addition, historical video games often cultivate forceful, Westernizing geopolitical values and strategies. They create misconceptions about the facts and dynamics of the historical process, often having an explicit American-centric focus on the representation of historical events. It is aimed at formation of historical mythology, which consolidates the absolute superiority of the Western matrix of values in public consciousness.

As a result, fixing that historical video games today have been fully legitimized as an actual media platform that constructs a part of the public history infosphere, one should consider both their positive enlightenment potential and the risks of becoming an idealized instrument of memory politics.

Acknowledgments

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